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THE DIFFUSION OF POPULAR TALES.

IT may not be amiss, in the first number of the JOURNAL OF AMERICAN FOLK-LORE, to direct the attention of its readers to some general questions connected with a large and interesting class of folk-lore, which, so far as its collection and investigation are concerned, is more accessible to students than any other department of this subject. The class to which I refer, household or popular tales, is also of special interest, for to it we may here apply, *mutatis mutandis*, the same methods which in Europe have given rise to such interesting and animated discussions.

In the first place, the very materials of our study are not essentially different from those in the old world. We have our aboriginal inhabitants, and then the invasion and settlement of peoples of different races,—a process more continuous and diversified than that which gave to Europe its present inhabitants. Thus the tales which are yet to be collected here may possibly be Indian, or French, or Spanish, or English, or African, to mention only the great tides of immigration which have rolled over our shores. To these tales, as I have remarked, are to be applied practically the same methods which are applied to European folk-tales. A brief review of these methods and their applicability to American conditions will form the subject of this paper.

Perhaps no more curious example of the spread of the scientific method into a seeming literary domain can be found than in the treatment of what are known as popular or household tales, and the history of their study is an interesting and instructive one. The earliest collections of popular tales, those of the Italians Straparola (1550) and Basile (1637), had no influence in awakening an interest in this class of literature, unless they may possibly have inspired the "*Histoire ou contes du temps passé*" (1697) of Charles Perrault. The French Academician was careful not to put his name to a book which he doubtless deemed unworthy of serious attention. The age, however, was weary of the interminable pastoral romances of D'Urfé, and the heroic romances of Calprenède and Mlle. de Scudéry, and longed for something more simple. Then, too, the prevailing depression of the times, the end of the reign of Louis XIV., with its defeats and religious gloom, favored a flight into the realm of pure imagination; just as in our prosaic and realistic age we willingly follow Mr. Haggard into the wilds and wonders of Central Africa. Perrault's stories became fashionable at once, and the next year saw a host of tales by the Countess de Murat, the Countess d'Aulnoy, and Mlle. de la Force. So carried away was society by

this new style of composition that a learned abbé of the day, De Villiers, issued a protest under the title, "*Entretiens sur les contes des fées et sur quelques autres ouvrages du temps*" (1699). The interest in these stories was purely literary, and they were often made the medium for personal and political satire. There was little in them that was popular; the theme in many cases was furnished by the memory of nursery tales, but the incidents were freely invented, and few of the great mass of stories of that period, except Perrault's, have any interest for the modern student of popular tales.

The fashion passed away, as all fashions do, and the fairy tale was left to amuse the denizens of the nursery or the peasants, until the Romantic movement in Germany led to the collection and study of the national popular literature. In 1812-14 the brothers Grimm published their "*Kinder- und Hausmärchen*," and laid the foundation of the present scientific study of folk-tales. Although the example of the Grimms gave a great impulse to the collection of popular tales in Germany and elsewhere, the scientific interest in this class of literature was not fully awakened until a much more recent date, and is connected with the modern science of Comparative Mythology. The widespread interest in popular tales, which has produced within the last twenty-five years an amazing number of collections from all parts of the world, is not wholly due to their intrinsic worth, great though in some cases it may be (notably in the collections of the Grimms and of Asbjørnsen and Moe), but largely to the fact that they are supposed to possess a scientific value for the comparative mythologist, ethnologist, and student of comparative literature. How they have acquired this value is known to all the readers of Max Müller's essays in "*Chips*" (vols. ii., iv.), and of Mr. Andrew Lang's "*Custom and Myth*," and the writer of the present article need not repeat what they have done so well.

These scholars, whom I have mentioned as typical of the two English schools of comparative folk-lore, have confined their animated discussions almost entirely to the question of the *origin* of popular tales, — a question which, from the very nature of things, cannot yet be satisfactorily solved. Many and extensive as have been the collections of popular tales published within the last seventy years, the field cannot yet be said to have been thoroughly gleaned. There are some countries of Europe, notably France and Spain, where little has been collected; and many countries of the Old and New World, especially among uncivilized races, where almost nothing has yet been gathered. Then, the collections already made have not been thoroughly examined, classified, and compared. What great labor is involved in this preliminary work can be seen from Mr. Ralston's articles on "*Beauty and the Beast*" ("*Nineteenth Cen-*

tury," December, 1878) and "Cinderella" (same periodical, November, 1879), or from the notes of E. Cosquin to his "Contes populaires lorrains" (Paris, 1884). In other words, it is difficult now to pronounce upon the question of the *origin* of popular tales, owing to the deficiency of material and the insufficient working over of what already exists.

While the scholars of England have directed their researches chiefly to the question of the origin of popular tales, German scholars have been more interested in the question of their diffusion; for while the two questions are intimately connected, and the limitations of the one are limitations of the other, still, from its very nature, the second can now be more exactly treated and may throw some light upon the first.

It will be necessary to review very briefly the various theories of the origin of popular tales, in order that the relations of the two questions may be more clearly seen, and the importance of the question of diffusion in pronouncing upon the probability of any one of the various theories of origin. These may be reduced to three, which I shall call, from the names of those who have proposed them, the theories of Grimm, Benfey, and Lang. Grimm's theory (and in it I include the more or less similar theories of the comparative mythologists Max Müller, Sir George Cox, Hahn, and De Gubernatis) is, that popular tales are a part of the mythology of the Aryan peoples, and were taken with them at their dispersion into the various countries of Europe. Benfey's theory, which, I may remark in passing, is the favorite one with Continental scholars, always excepting De Gubernatis, is that the popular tales of Europe were imported into it, within historical times, from India, and diffused chiefly through literary channels, translations of Oriental story-books, etc. Benfey does not inquire into the question of the origin of popular tales in the land to which he traces them, but confines himself (in the masterly Introduction to his translation of the *Pantschatantra*, Leipzig, 1859) to the investigation of the channels of diffusion and the proof of the substantial identity of the Buddhistic stories of India and the household tales of Europe. Mr. Lang believes "that they were derived and inherited from the savage state of man, from the savage conditions of life, and the savage way of regarding the world," and that "Household Tales occupy a middle place between the stories of savages and the myths of early civilizations." (Introduction to Hunt's "Grimm's Household Tales," London, 1884, vol. i. pp. xli., xliii.) In regard to the diffusion of popular tales, the school of Grimm believes that they were disseminated exactly as were the Aryan languages by the dispersion of the primitive Aryan nation. Mr. Lang says: "As to the *diffusion* of

the tales, we think it impossible at present to determine how far they may have been transmitted from people to people, and wafted from place to place, in the obscure and immeasurable past of human antiquity, or how far they may be due to identity of human fancy everywhere ;” and later : “The process of *diffusion* remains uncertain. Much may be due to the identity everywhere of early fancy ; something to transmission.” (*Op. cit.* i. pp. xl, xliii.) Benfey ascribes the diffusion of popular tales to conscious transmission through literary channels and unconscious dissemination by word of mouth.

The question of the origin and diffusion of popular tales was a comparatively simple one in the time of the Grimms. They saw that the tales so far collected among the Aryan peoples of Europe were substantially the same. At this period the wonderful results of the rediscovery of Sanskrit were still fresh in the minds of European scholars, and the vital fact of the Aryan unity in speech and religion suggested, of course, the unity of tradition. It was not long before the resemblance between popular tales and myths caused the former to be included in the domain of comparative mythology. Gradually, however, collections of the tales of non-Aryan peoples, and, above all, of savage tribes, were made, and found to possess a remarkable likeness to those of the Aryan nations. It was difficult for the Grimm school to account for this. They had scouted the idea that tales could be diffused from India (or elsewhere) by borrowing, and consequently were estopped from claiming that savage races or non-Aryan peoples might have borrowed their stories from the Aryan peoples. They were apparently forced to assume that the savage races in question had at one time, as Mr. Lang puts it, “shared the capacious cradle of the Aryan race.”

The same arguments which make against the Grimm theory also oppose that of Benfey. If we assume the theory to be true, we must explain in some way the diffusion of Indian tales not only among the non-Aryan peoples, but also among remote tribes of savages, unless, indeed, we are prepared to deny the substantial identity of the popular tales, customs, etc., of civilized and uncivilized peoples. A more serious objection to the Benfey theory, and one which appears fatal, is the fact that popular tales closely resembling those of India and Europe have been recently discovered in Egyptian papyri. These stories (published by Maspero, “*Contes populaires de l’Egypte ancienne*,” Paris, 1882) extend back to the time of Rameses II., some fourteen hundred years before our era, and centuries before India was known to history.

I think it is not extravagant to say that the theories of Grimm and Benfey have broken down,—I mean as theories to explain generally the origin and diffusion of popular tales. That there is

some truth still left in each I am far from denying. Some of our popular tales may well be the débris of the Aryan mythology, and a larger number were probably either imported from India or influenced by Indian tales. It is an interesting fact that in the study of popular tales, as in other departments of study, as soon as one theory or method has been carried to its logical result and lost its interest for new workers in the field, a fresh method or theory has taken its place, and stimulated students to renewed research. What the Aryan theory of popular tales was capable of in the hands of "solar mythologists" like Sir George Cox and De Gubernatis, our readers all know. The Benfey theory was fast becoming a mere pretext for amassing parallel stories, the connection between which it was often impossible to show, and which never could be with absolute certainty connected with the Indian original, or supposed original, story. I believe, however, that there is more truth in the Benfey theory than Mr. Lang, for example, is inclined to admit; and I believe the Benfey theory has shown (at least in regard to an extensive class of popular literature, fables, jests, and anecdotes) an ease and rapidity of diffusion from literary sources to the people which is almost incredible, and which must be taken into account by all other theories.

From what has been said above, it will be seen how difficult and premature it is to pronounce in favor of any one of the theories of the origin of popular tales; and, after all, their greatest value and usefulness have consisted in interesting scholars in a subject which they might otherwise have found devoid of attraction. Some acquaintance with these theories, however, is necessary in order to properly collect the various classes of folk-tales in our own country. The mass of possibly existing popular tales may be roughly divided into two classes: those of the aboriginal inhabitants, and those of the later settlers, including the former slave population. In collecting the tales of the first class, it must be borne in mind that whatever theory of the origin of folk-tales we may follow, experience has proved that every kind of popular literature is diffused and interchanged with extraordinary rapidity and ease. Here is an interesting example of recent date. M. Maspero gave a copy of his "*Contes populaires de l'Egypte ancienne*," Paris, 1882, to an Italian schoolmaster residing in Upper Egypt, who told some of them, translating into Arabic as he went along, to the people of the country. In February of 1885, M. Maspero was told by a European living at Luxor that he had heard an Arab recite a tale closely resembling the legend of Rhampsinitus in Herodotus, bk. II. Maspero set to work to obtain a copy of the tale, and it was taken down in Arabic by the son of the French consular agent residing at the place. Fur-

ther investigation, however, showed that this very story was one that the Italian schoolmaster had put into circulation, it being contained in Maspero's book in the form of the old French version by P. Saliat. Miss Amelia B. Edwards, who relates this curious occurrence (in "The Academy," vol. xxviii. p. 292), adds: "By this time they are probably current in most of the villages of Upper Egypt, and in the course of a year or two they will be popular from Alexandria to Assouan. Thus it happens that a dozen or thirteen tales of love, magic, and adventure, some of which were already of remote antiquity in the days not merely of Herodotus, but of Rameses the Great, are destined, towards the close of the nineteenth century, to live again, and again to be popular in the ancient country of their birth. M. Maspero publishes the facts in order that travellers and *savants* may not be misled by this phenomenon."

While, however, the greatest care must be taken in collecting to obtain a pure and uncontaminated source, still the collector must guard against rash inferences drawn from fancied resemblances. If Mr. Lang's theory be true, then we should expect to find these very resemblances in the folk-tales of all peoples, and it is not *necessary* to explain them by the theory of conscious or unconscious borrowing. This point may also be illustrated by an event of recent occurrence.

In 1870 the late Professor C. F. Hartt heard at Santarem, on the Amazons, a story in the *lingua geral* of "The Tortoise that outran the Deer," a version of which he afterward published in the "Cornell Era" (January 20, 1871), and which attracted the attention of a writer in "The Nation" (February 23, 1871), who gave a variant of the same myth as found among the negroes of South Carolina. (The same story occurs in "Uncle Remus," New York, 1881, p. 80.) When Professor Hartt returned to Brazil, in 1871, he collected a few additional myths of the same class, which he published at Rio de Janeiro in 1875 ("Amazonian Tortoise Myths"). Professor Hartt says (p. 5): "The question has arisen whether many of the stories I have given, that bear so close a resemblance to Old World fables, may not have been introduced by the negroes; but I see no reason for entertaining this suspicion, for they are too widely spread, their form is too thoroughly Brazilian, they are most numerous in just those regions where negroes are not and have not been abundant, and, moreover, they occur, not in Portuguese, but in the *Lingua Geral*." I have reason to believe that Professor Hartt, later, modified this opinion after hearing his Amazonian myths related by the negroes in Rio, and lost much of his interest in the subject. The curious resemblance between the Amazonian story mentioned above and the one found among the negroes of South Carolina was not

noticed again until Mr. Herbert Smith, in his "Brazil, the Amazons, and the Coast" (New York, 1879), in a chapter on "The Myths of the Amazonian Indians," gave a number of animal fables, merely noticing the resemblances which had already attracted the attention of Professor Hartt and others. The proof-sheets of this chapter were sent to Mr. J. C. Harris, who at once saw that almost every story quoted by Mr. Smith had a parallel among the stories of the Southern negroes, and some were so nearly identical as, in his opinion, to point unmistakably to a common origin; but when and where? Mr. Harris asks: "When did the negro or the North American Indian come into contact with the tribes of South America?" The writer of the present article, after a careful examination of the subject ("Popular Science Monthly," April, 1881), came to the conclusion that these stories were introduced into Brazil and the Southern States by the African slaves. At the same time it is not impossible that the stories of the Amazonian Indians had an independent origin, and, arising out of savage modes of thought, would naturally resemble stories evolved in Africa by a similar process. Even if we suppose that the Africans themselves obtained their "Reynard the Fox" stories from European settlers, we do not materially change the question. That the negroes of our Southern States have absorbed stories from the whites is undeniable. (Uncle Remus's story of "Jacky-my-Lantern" is an example of it.)

I think the above illustrations will show how desirable it is that the mind of the collector should be free from any prejudice arising from a preconceived theory of the origin and diffusion of popular tales. It is most desirable that the myths of the Amazonian Indians should be collected and studied, no matter what theory they may ultimately confirm. So with the lore of our own negroes.

The latest words of the acknowledged master in this field (Mr. Lang in "Perrault's Popular Tales," Oxford, Clarendon Press, 1888) are no more conclusive than this: "The whole question of the importation of stories into savage countries by civilized peoples has not been studied properly. We can hardly suppose that the Zulus borrowed their copious and most characteristic store of *Märchen*, in plot and incident resembling the *Märchen* of Europe, from Dutch or English settlers. On the other hand, certain Algonkin tales recently published by Mr. Leland bear manifest marks of French influence. Left thus in the dark, without historical information as to the cradle of *Märchen*, without clear and copious knowledge as to *recent* borrowing from European traders and settlers, and without the power of setting limits to the possibility of *coincidence*, we are unable to give any general answer to the sphinx of popular tales. We only know for certain that there is practically

no limit to the chances of transmission in the remote past of the race. Wherever man, woman, or child can go, there a tale may go and find a new home. Any drifted and wandering canoe, any captured alien wife, any stolen slave passed from hand to hand in commerce or war, may carry a *Märchen*. These processes of transmission have been going on, practically, ever since man was man. Thus it is even more difficult to limit the possibilities of transmission than the chances of coincidence. But the chances of coincidence, also, are numerous. The *ideas* and *situations* of popular tales are all afloat, everywhere, in the imaginations of early and of pre-scientific men. Who can tell how often they might casually unite in similar wholes independently combined?"

Fortunately the subject to which this journal is to be devoted does not depend for its interest upon any theory of origin or diffusion. As we have seen, the interest in one class of folk-lore, popular tales, has grown as theory after theory has been proposed, examined, and rejected. This, I am sure, will be the case in our own country, where the field of study is so wide and so little explored. All sorts of pleasant surprises are in waiting for the scholar who devotes himself to it with some previous preparation from the study of European folk-tales; while even children may make collections of the highest scientific interest and literary charm.¹ To some it may be given to reconstruct the nursery tales of Old England, which have almost entirely disappeared, from their survivals in New England. To others, to discover in Canada or Louisiana a field as fresh and fascinating as that first revealed to us in the pages of "Uncle Remus." Finally, all can aid, according to their opportunities, in the collection and preservation of material which delighted our childhood, and which offers such manifold subjects of study to our maturer minds.

T. F. Crane.

¹ One of the most charming collections of tales made of late years, "Indian Fairy Tales," collected and translated by Maive Stokes, London, 1880, was the work of a child who took down the stories told her by her Hindústání nurses. There is also reason to suppose that Charles Perrault's son had a hand in the famous "Contes" which now are universally attributed to the father alone. See Mr. Lang's edition, p. xxviii.